

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

Practicing Wesleyan-Holiness
Spiritual Formation



SESSION 3
Three Key Questions

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Three Key Questions

SESSION OVERVIEW

Who Am I?

What Am I Searching For?

Why Am I Here?

Application

Exam

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should:

- explored biblical and theological answers to the questions of the human identity, purpose, and longing as they relate to spiritual formation foundations.
- experienced and embraced light on your own personal search for meaning, identity, and purpose.
- acted on insights regarding the ways that human purpose, identity, and meaning affect personal spiritual growth and to apply such insights to your own ministry.

Three Key Questions



INTRODUCTION

Rebecca Thompson looks at the North Platte River flowing 112 feet below in the rocky gorge beneath the Fremont Canyon Bridge near Casper, Wyoming. She gazes at the rocks and the water and begins to cry. She tells her friend who is holding Rebecca's two-year old daughter she has been here before, 19 years before when she was just 18. Rebecca sobs out the story.

On that awful night she and her 11-year-old sister, Amy, went to a convenience store in Casper to buy potato chips and Cokes. When they came out someone had slashed a tire on their car with a knife. Rebecca went back into the store, phoned her mom and told her that two nice men were going to help them get the tire fixed.

But instead of helping, Jerry Lee Jenkins and Ronald Leroy Kennedy grabbed them and hauled them off in their car to the Fremont Canyon Bridge 40 miles away. When they found that lonely bridge on that dark night, the two men took turns beating and raping Rebecca. Her face was pulp. Somehow Rebecca was able to beg them not to do the same to her horrified little sister. They didn't. They just threw her off the bridge. She hit a boulder at the river's edge 112 feet below and died instantly.

Their lust sated, the rapists threw Rebecca off the bridge too. She hit a ledge then bounced into the water with her hip broken in five places. She dragged herself ashore, hovered between two big rocks, and shivered through the long night. A man and his wife on a fishing trip found Rebecca about 10 AM the next day. The doctors at the Casper hospital set her broken bones by surgery and pins and a body caste. But they could not heal her mind and spirit.

They could not bring her little sister back. They could not stop the nightmares. Rebecca couldn't either. The police caught Kennedy and Jenkins. Rebecca testified against them, pointed them out in open court. She had to describe the details of that horrific attack. What shame. Everyone now knew of her violation, her humiliation. One of the killers taunted her right there in the courtroom by smirking and sliding his finger across his throat in a slashing motion.

The jury sentenced Kennedy and Jenkins to death. But the U.S. Supreme Court overruled the death penalty with, "Life in prison with the possibility of parole." The murdering rapists appealed for a new trial on the basis that their defense lawyer didn't really want to get them off.

Would they get out and carry out the threat they made to Rebecca in court? Their appeal was rejected, but as soon as they were eligible Jenkins and Kennedy began to apply for parole. Twice every year they applied. So every six months Rebecca had to go back to court and relive that shameful experience. Year after year she recited her shame.

As time went by she had not been assaulted just once but repeatedly. Every time a nightmare woke her up, every time she thought of her dead sister, every time she had to testify again at a parole hearing, the shame of it all came back. Every time she walked down the street, she lived it again as people on the street whispered.

Rebecca could not find the light after that dark night. She lived in the shadows of her guilt (for getting her little sister killed), her anger—rage at the monsters who had killed her sister and mutilated her body and spirit, and anger at whatever God there might be who let such evil things happen. And the shame was the worst of all; the shame, the eternal shame. Every holiday was mutely celebrated in the shadow of that reality. Every morning, afternoon, evening came and went under that cloud of shame.

So why after 19 years did she want to come back here to the Fremont Canyon Bridge? Rebecca is weeping, out of control now. Her friend does not want the two-year-old to see her mom like this, so she turns to take the baby back to the car. That's when he heard the body hit the water 112 feet below in the bottom of the canyon. The Fremont Canyon Bridge claimed Rebecca Thompson one final time.

The Rebecca Thompson story is based on eight newspaper articles that appeared in the Casper (Wyoming) Star-Tribune. A longer version of it is found in Reflecting God, pages 19-20. A shorter version may be found in Max Lucado's, He Still Moves Stones (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993), 23-24.

The story of Rebecca will help as you launch your exploration into the questions of human identity, purpose, and meaning. We start with Rebecca, move to the Bible, then to the Christian faith, and finally into our own hearts and ministries.

We will examine Gen. 1-2; Heb. 2:6-8; Deut. 28:65; Isa. 26:8-9; and 1 John 3:1-2 noting any statements, indications, or hints having to do with these questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What am I searching for?

WHO AM I?



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Arthur Schopenhauer, German philosopher, was strolling down the street pondering the mystery of human destiny. Lost in thought, he awkwardly bumped into a man, nearly knocking him down. The angry pedestrian snarled at Schopenhauer, “Who do you think you are?”

“I wish I knew,” Schopenhauer replied.

From Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* to Alex Haley’s *Roots*, literature has recorded our search to solve the riddle of personal identity. From the wanderings of Odysseus to the birth-mother search of the adoptee next door we have sought to answer: “Who am I?”

ARE YOU AN ANIMAL?

Some scholars say you are a beast—perhaps the best of the beasts, but still a beast. Hamsters, horses, humans are all chained to the same drives and behavior patterns—or so say the sociobiologists. *From Reflecting God, 21.*

Wes Tracy heard Joe Bayley, a giant among Christian publishers and editors a generation ago, tell of an encounter at the doctor’s office. Joe’s faith survived the tragic loss of two sons. He was taking his dying boy for one more treatment. While in the waiting room he met a mother whose son was also dying. Joe spoke words of comfort and inspiration about meeting her son in heaven.

Unfortunately this woman had bought the animal definition of human beings. She would have nothing to do with God and heavenly reunions. “Listen, Mister,” she said, “sometime in the next month my son will die. Then we will put his body in a box, dig a hole in the ground, and cover him up with dirt. That will be the end of that.”

ARE YOU A CIPHER, A ZERO?

Some declare all this searching for a deeper identity is beside the point. You are born to die, and your pathetic little life has no meaning. Hugh Hefner, of *Playboy* fame, states proudly life is an end in itself and pleasure is preferable to pain, so grab all the pleasure you can get. Some have a different, though just as pessimistic, philosophy.


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An ancient king demanded his wisest man tell him the entire history of the human race. The scholar came back after months of study and said, “The history of the human race is: They were born, they suffered, they died.” Is suffering or pleasure all there is to your existence?

ARE YOU A HUMAN COMPUTER?

Some thinkers claim you are a complex and intelligent machine. Theologian Stanley J. Grenz points out that the *Star Trek* series “moves a giant step beyond the wedding of brain and computer chip to the humanization of the computer itself” (25). The 1999 film *Matrix* goes even farther. Personified Artificial Intelligence (AI) enslaves the human race, drawing its existence from the very life of humans. So, does your upgraded computer look like a portrait of you, the real you?

ARE YOU AN IMMORTAL SOUL?

Careful—think before you answer. Part of you, but only part of you, may be described as an immortal soul. Those who use this phrase to define you also act as if the immaterial part of our being is all that counts. The body is just the prison house of the soul. *From Grenz, 28.*

Shirley MacLaine, in one of her out-of-body experiences, said, “I now understood how irrelevant my physical body was.” One day your immortal soul will shed this body and fly free, and you can then become your true self. You hear this kind of talk at funerals a lot. But it is sub-Christian. *From Reflecting God, 21-22.*

This notion that death is a doorway to eternal bliss conjures scary implications. Is suicide the route to trouble-free happiness? This idea also is in harmony with the reincarnation doctrine that our true humanness resides in some mysterious spiritual element called the soul. This notion is at least as old as Plato and several ancient Eastern religions that have found their way into the bloodstream of our cultural mind. But the popularity of this presumption does not change the Bible teaching that you and I are embodied creatures. And we will be embodied beings throughout eternity—just as, many believe, Jesus will be. *From Grenz, 27.*

Another thing that is sub-Christian about defining yourself as an immortal soul is it reveals the idea that immortality is something we have or are, something we possess. “There is nothing within us that is intrinsically immortal. . . We simply don’t have within ourselves the power to live forever.” Eternal life, all life, is something we receive, not something we are. It is a gift of God.


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ARE YOU A GODLING?

Some gurus tell us we are virtual gods. John Denver said in a radio interview, “I’m making progress. I’m getting better and better. Someday I’ll be a god.” Sadly, he became an air crash victim before he could claim godhood.

Carol Riddell challenges us to transcend our status as primitive *Homo sapiens* and join her in becoming *Homo divinus*. A host of others, some within the Christian community itself, urge us to discover God within. They echo the notions of *The Aquarian Gospel* and its heresy “all things are God; all things are one.” *From Grenz, 102.*

Such teachings sound so warm and cozy it is hard to examine them critically. But many who do, find them at odds with the Christian faith. *From J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 123.*

In a hundred examples the Bible shows that God is distinct from and above all created things and beings. In fact, while bearing the image of God, we are “fundamentally one with all that is not God, whether trees, galaxies, animals or the earth. Indeed, our solidarity with the non-human realm is indicated by our creation along with other land animals on the sixth day (Gen. 1:24-30) and our sharing the same food with them.”

THE CHRISTIAN VIEW

So if you are not an animal, a sophisticated computer, an immortal soul, or a godling, what do you say when the voice calls “Produce your I.D.?” *From J. Kenneth Grider, A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1994), 237.*

You are an embodied person created by God and in the very image of God (Gen. 1:27). The Lord arranged it that when Adam and Eve had children, the image of God was passed on to all generations. Echoes of God’s own image include our ability to love.

Some theologians say the main element in the divine image of God in mankind (*imago Dei*) is our capacity to love—especially love expressed in our maleness and femaleness. This includes marriage but is not confined to things marital. Echoes of God’s image are also seen to rise above self-centeredness, to reason, to make moral decisions.


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Even animals make decisions, you say. True, but they do not make moral decisions. Dying for the faith as a martyr is a human capacity that expresses dramatically the image of God in persons. This divine image within is often what those who teach us to look for God within ourselves are talking about. There is something Godlike within the human heart, something positive, and something that can be counted on to work for good and wholeness, to transcend self, to love, to reason, to make moral choices.

You are the object of God's love. Max Lucado put it this way, "If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If He had a wallet, your photo would be in it. He sends you flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning. Whenever you want to talk He'll listen. And the Christmas gift He sent you in Bethlehem? Face it, friend. He's crazy about you." The Bible reveals the lengths to which God will go to express His love for you. The suffering of Christ is the supreme example. "Perhaps a good Christian response to Descartes' dictum *cogito ergo sum*, I think, therefore I am, is *sum amatus ergo sum*, I am loved, therefore I am." *From A Gentle Thunder (Dallas: Word, 1995), 122. From Middleton and Walsh, 149*

You are a unity of body, soul, spirit, mind, and heart. Some say we are body and spirit. Others say we are body, soul, and spirit. Nazarene theologian J. Kenneth Grider writes that both views are incomplete. Though spirit and soul can be distinguished according to Scripture, the person is a complex unitary being made up of body, soul, spirit, heart, and mind. *From Grider, 241.*

You are a person who is free and responsible. Though marked by sin and a member of a fallen race, God has graciously given you the ability to choose God and good. We call this prevenient grace. You are not free to choose your parents, your birthday, or your mental capacity. But you are able, in spite of sin, to choose God and good. Even this ability is the gift of God. John Wesley wrote, "He [God] made you free agents; having an inward power of self-determination, which is essential to your nature. And He deals with you as free agents from first to last." *From Works, 6:311.*

Environment influences you, but because of prevenient grace it does not have the last word. Some teach that whether you are a missionary or a murderer you should not be praised or blamed because you are merely what society (environment) made of you. But this is not the picture of humankind the Bible or experience reveals. You are given the capacity to choose, and you are held responsible for your choice. You cast the deciding vote in choosing good or evil.

WHAT AM I SEARCHING FOR?



NOTES

THE LONGING HEART

After reading each of the following excerpts, ask yourself, “What does this reveal about our search?”

Excerpt 1: Graduation, Stanford University—a student speaker addressed the celebrating crowd describing his class as not having any idea how “it relates to the past or the future, having little sense of the present, no life sustaining beliefs, secular or religious” and consequently having “no goal and no path . . .” (from, Rollo May, *The Cry for Myth* [New York: Norton, 1991], 21).

Point of the story: Even the best educated among us longs for something. Could it be for God?

Excerpt 2: Everywhere you see people lost, lonely, hungry, and searching for something. Confusing as this life is, they often do something as dumb as the three car thieves in Larkspur, CA, who tried to steal a pickup truck. The owner saw them and chased them yelling. He hailed a policeman and he too gave chase. The thieves made a valiant effort to escape. They scrambled over a tall fence with barbed wire ripping their pants and scratching the blood out of their shins. But it was worth it. The rotund truck owner and the middle-aged cop could never scale a fence like that. They didn’t have to. The cop looked through the wires and said, “Congratulations, men. You just broke into San Quentin!” (*Homiletics*, Nov./Dec. 1995, 63).

Point of the story: The more we reach for what we think we want, the emptier we feel. Our attempts to save ourselves are usually about as smart as breaking into prison. Have you ever broken into a homemade jail?

Excerpt 3: Douglas Coupland is on to something. This man who coined the term Generation X wrote in *Life After God* ([New York: Pocket Books, 1994], 359). “My secret is that I need God—that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I can no longer . . . be . . . giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.”

Point of the story: More than a longing, our hunger for God is a desperate need.

WHY AM I HERE?



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When the new millennium arrived people were still asking “Why am I here?” The film *Dogma* (a combination of sacrilege and comedy) ends with the main character asking God, “Why are we here?” God, played by pop singer Alanis Morissette, just grins, tweaks the questioner’s nose, and disappears. Is existence a joke? Is our purpose a mystery? Does God even know why we are here?

Joan Osborne’s hit song pictures us as passengers on a bus headed nowhere. Then it poses the haunting idea that perhaps God is also on the bus as *One of Us* helplessly hurtling on to oblivion. But in your heart of hearts you know there is a purpose to life. We find that intuition confirmed in the Bible.

The Bible says the Lord put us in authority over the earth. “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image . . . and let them rule over . . . all the creatures’” (Gen. 1:26). We are part of creation, and we are to be caretakers of the earth. Christians sometimes develop an anti-nature bias that regards nature as something to be exploited and used up. We must realize that creation is more than our plaything. It is God’s handiwork. Psalm 8:6 says, “You made him [humankind] ruler over the works of your hands.”

Another part of our purpose is to develop a godly community of faith. Maria Harris had a point when she wrote in *Fashion Me a People*, “A solitary Christian is no Christian. We come to God together, or we do not come at all.” The Church, the family of faith, is to reflect the Trinity. The three in-one God models the perfect community, and Christians on earth are to echo that ideal community.

The genius of the early Wesleyan movement was the community achieved in the face-to-face groups. They discovered for themselves the wisdom of the New Testament, which urges the “bearing of one another’s burdens, of confronting, correcting, encouraging, exhorting, comforting and edifying one another; of provoking one another to love and good works, of confessing our faults to one another; of weeping with those who weep and rejoicing with those who rejoice; of sharing . . . the same love and unity that Jesus shares with his Father.” *From John Knox Press, 1989, 55.*

We are here to reflect the image of God. Some kings in ancient times left images of themselves in the parts of their kingdom where they could not often be in person. Likewise, God placed you and me on earth to represent our King and


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Creator. We are to reflect the Lord's character in our world. That is why we must stand with unveiled faces beholding the glory of the Lord as in a mirror. Thus, we will be transformed more and more into His image as 2 Cor. 3:18 teaches.

YOU ARE GOD'S POEM

"We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph. 2:10). The basic Greek word translated workmanship is *poema*. Our word poem comes from that ancient term. Think about it; you are God's poem. . . His work of art; His masterpiece! God is writing a poem in and through your life.

You are an embodied person created in the image of God. You are hungering for a vital, real, and intimate relationship with God. There is a God-shaped vacuum within that waits to be filled with the love and fellowship of the Spirit. And you are here on earth to reflect the image of God the way a work of art reflects the heart of its creator.

Your destiny is not absorption into some impersonal Nirvana, but full community with the God who invites us to the heaven He has prepared for those who wear the signet ring of faith in His Son Jesus Christ.

Now there is a calling for you loftier than the divine tweaking of the nose in *Dogma*. Much more meaningful than the bleak Fremont Canyon Bridge that shut out the light for Rebecca Thompson. Ponder St. Paul's plea: "I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received" (Eph. 4:1).

CLOSING THOUGHT

If Rebecca Thompson had only known that she was so much more than her shame. But she didn't know. There are Fremont Canyon Bridges all over the landscape and Rebeccas in every town. Everywhere there are women and men acquainted with humiliation, violation, shame. They think they know who they are. Each thinks his or her name is spelled Worthless, Stained, Hopeless, Humiliated, Violated, or Shamed.

"What is man that you are mindful of him . . . You made him a little lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honor and put everything under his feet" (Heb. 2:6-8).

APPLICATION



NOTES

1. Write a reflection paper on: What was Rebecca Thompson's philosophy of life? That is, how did this tragic woman answer life's basic questions (Who am I? Why am I here? What am I searching for?).
2. Read and reflect on Genesis 3 and Psalm 51. Be prepared to discuss your thoughts on the meaning of these Bible passages when you meet with your mentor.
3. From a perusal of news media, reading, or personal experience and observation, collect at least six examples of how sin darkens lives today. Be prepared to share these with your mentor when you meet.

JOURNALING

Note: Throughout your work in this module, it is suggested you keep a journal. This is an important tool in the study of spiritual formation. Journaling is a tool to help you slow down in your studies and listen to your heart, soul, mind, and most importantly to God.

In your journal, reflect how your responses to the three questions dealt with in this session are different today from five years ago. (Questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What am I searching for?)

SUGGESTED READING

- Stanley J. Grenz, *What Christians Really Believe and Why* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 21-44, 112-136.
- J. Kenneth Grider, *A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1994), 236-241.
- Wesley Tracy, et. al., *Reflecting God* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City and Christian Holiness Partnership, 2000), chapters 2-3.
- Wes Tracy, *Reflecting God Workbook*, 15-22.

EXAM



NOTES

1. One of life's basic questions is "Who am I?"
 - A. True
 - B. False

2. We are virtual gods.
 - A. True
 - B. False

3. Only the immaterial part of our beings count.
 - A. True
 - B. False

4. Searching for meaning is an irrelevant activity.
 - A. True
 - B. False

5. We are free and responsible.
 - A. True
 - B. False

6. The more we reach for what we think we want, the emptier we feel.
 - A. True
 - B. False

7. The Bible says the Lord put us in authority over the earth.
 - A. True
 - B. False

8. We are to become godlings.
 - A. True
 - B. False

9. Which one of the following is **not** a misconception of who we are?
 - A. an animal
 - B. a human computer
 - C. meaningless existence
 - D. unity of body, soul, spirit, mind and heart



10. One of the following is **not** one of the basic questions for life.
- A. Who am I?
 - B. When will I belong?
 - C. Why am I here?
 - D. What am I searching for?
11. Our attempts to save ourselves are usually _____.
- A. about as smart as breaking in to prison
 - B. fruitful experiences of personal growth
 - C. testimonies to others about the human spirit
 - D. wonderful life events
12. Which one of the following statements is **not** true?
- A. You are an embodied person created by God and in the very image of God.
 - B. You are the object of God's love.
 - C. You are a person with limited freedom.
 - D. You are a unity of body, soul, spirit, mind, and heart.
13. Which of the following is one of the purposes for our existence?
- A. Develop a godly community of faith
 - B. Develop a desperate need for God
 - C. Develop better attitudes
 - D. Develop our natural abilities

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT

**NOTES**

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. Discuss with your mentor the importance of the three key questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What am I searching for? Discuss your personal responses to those questions.
2. Review your study of Genesis 3 and Psalm 51 with your mentor. Talk about the meaning of these Bible passages.
3. Share with your mentor the six examples of how sin darkens lives today. Talk about these stark realities and how serious they are to in relationship to spiritual formation.